



Attending to Stress

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Mindfulness is the **awareness** that arises from paying **attention on purpose**, in the **present moment**, and **without judgment** in the service of **self-understanding** and **wisdom**.

--Jon Kabat-Zinn

Also....

Mindfulness is cultivated by **paying close attention** to your **moment-to-moment experience** while, as best you can, **not getting caught up** in your ideas and opinions, likes and dislikes”

--Jon Kabat-Zinn

Attention and Awareness

- We can only be aware of what we pay attention to.
- We spend much of our lives not utilizing our attention intentionally and operating on autopilot.
- When the mind is wandering, we are disconnected from ourselves, our immediate experience, and the people in our lives.
- Mind wandering is often associated with negative mood states and feelings of unhappiness.

Mindfulness is

- An innate human capacity.
- A skill that can be cultivated with practice.
- Characterized not only by present moment awareness but attitudinal qualities (patience, not getting caught up, not striving, and acceptance as examples) that support a healthy way of being in relationship with experience.

Mindfulness is not:

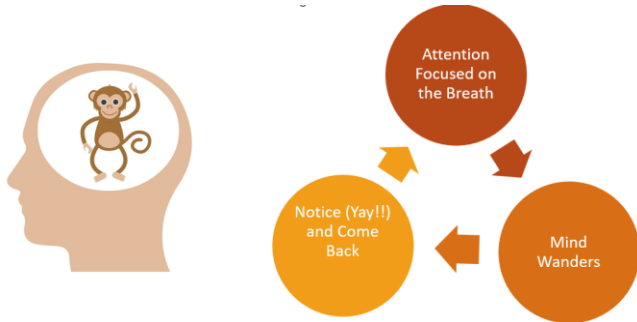
- A method for controlling or stopping thoughts
- A method for controlling or stopping sensations, feelings, or emotions
- Positive thinking
- A relaxation technique
- An escape

Meditation = Practice

- Many different ways to practice.
- Practice transforms the innate capacity to pay attention intentionally into a more dependable skill.
- Practice cultivates attitudinal qualities that support a healthy way of being with experience.

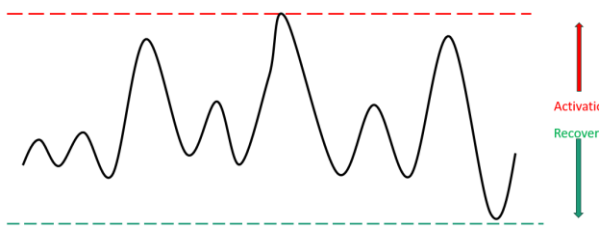


Basic Breath Awareness Meditation



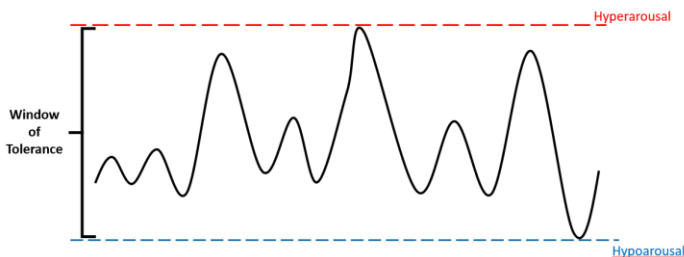
Stress is

- A biological response initiated by the **nervous system** that sets in motions biological processes meant to fuel response (and recovery)
- What happens when you are faced with **perceived** challenge threat.
- What happens when something you **care about** is challenged.
- Uncomfortable (most of the time for most people).
- Normal.
- Workable.



The Vagus Nerve

- Maintains normal nervous system balance.
- Responsible for the recovery side of stress.
- Acts like a brake that is continuously engaged—it lets up to let the nervous system activate and re-engages to bring things back into balance.
- Can be intentionally engaged through various practices—diaphragmatic breathing with an emphasis on exhalation, consciously relaxing tense muscles, stretching--to name a few.





The Window of Tolerance is

- The window in which we experience a regulated stress response, outside of which is the survival reactions of fight/flight/freeze.
- Wider when we are resourced (sleep, rest, nutrition, hydration, social interaction).
- Wider when we have had prior experience with successfully navigating a particular stressor. (This is sometimes referred to as stress inoculation.)
- Wider when we have healthy ways of relating to stress.

- Wider when we view stress as normal and workable or something to be avoided. (The view that stress is something to be avoided results in stressing about stress, which has been shown to result in significantly worse health and well-being outcomes)

Perception (how we see things or don't see them) is

- Awareness plus the mind making sense of the raw data of awareness.
- Informed by past experience.
- Important to normal and healthy functioning.
- Not always correct (because it is informed by past experience).
- A determinant of whether stress arises and, if it does, how significant the stress response is.

Ways that Mindfulness Can Help with Stress

- Reduces stress reactivity by inserting a pause between stimulus and response.
- Re-perceiving: capacity to see something in a different way that is more workable.
- Body Awareness: recognizing body sensations that signal stress triggers as a way of pausing before responding.
- Attending to the physical impacts of stress: mindfulness techniques that release tension and activate the vagus nerve such as conscious relaxation, stretching, and belly breathing.
- Resourcing: mindfulness practices that cultivate self-kindness, self-compassion, gratitude and joy.

Mindful Tips for Managing Stress

Tip #1: NOT A TIGER. Stress is a physiological reaction of the body to something that the mind perceives as a threat. An instantaneous reaction meant to protect us from life-threatening danger—such as being attacked by a tiger—this response shuts down the cognitive mind and causes a cascade of physiologic reactions—increased adrenalin and cortisol, elevated heart rate, elevated blood pressure—all meant to fuel the flight/fight response. However, very little that we encounter in modern life is served by this response, referred to as an amygdala hijack. Saying to ourselves, “**Not a Tiger**” when we feel stressed or threatened can be a good way to remind ourselves that most if not all things that trigger a stress reaction are not tigers that we need to run away from, but more complex issues that we need to respond to with the full array of our cognitive facilities. Saying “**Not a Tiger**” can provide just the pause we need to avoid an amygdala hijack.

Tip #2: WHERE ARE MY FEET? Bringing attention to wherever the body is in contact with the solid surface of the earth is a useful technique for bringing awareness into the body. When we bring awareness into the body we heighten our capacity to feel sensations associated with emotions as they are arising and distance ourselves a bit from the grip of the mind. Dropping in and noticing what is there—that tightness that signals fear or that sense of pressure that signals anger—allows us to work with our emotions more effectively.



Tip # 3: BREATHE. The sympathetic nervous system is activated by the amygdala and is responsible for the fight/flight response. The other side of the autonomic nervous system—the parasympathetic nervous system—applies the brake to this response. Lucky for us, the parasympathetic nervous system can be activated with the breath. When faced with a situation that feels stressful, taking **slow deep in-breaths into the belly*** and then exhaling slowly, bringing full attention to the exhale can help to engender a sense of calm and help the body to return to normal autonomic balance. *(Taking deep high breaths into the chest can fuel anxiety and heighten stress.)

Tip #4: DON'T PROLONG STRESS BY FEEDING IT. The capacity to return to normal autonomic balance is hindered when we prolong stress reactivity by dwelling on the circumstances that triggered the stress. One of the most pervasive ways we prolong stress is through venting. Thought to be a way to alleviate stress, the narrative that we repeat when we vent actually prolongs the neurophysiologic mechanisms causing stress. An unfortunate add-on is that the validation we receive from others that our anger or frustration is justified serves to reinforce conditioned ways of responding to situations that usually aren't helpful. (It is, however, a good practice to seek the company of someone you trust to help you process a difficult experience.)

Tip #5: PRACTICE CONSCIOUS RELAXATION. Common places where stress will manifest itself as tension or tightness include the shoulders, upper back, neck, jaw, temples, chest and abdomen. When faced with a stressful situation, bring attention into your body noticing where you feel any tension or tightness. Take a slow deep inbreath and, on the exhale, imagine that you are sending the outbreath to that part of the body. Imagine the body part softening, relaxing, and the tension releasing. Methodically scanning the body from head to toe several times during the day can be a good way to notice and release accumulated tension.

Tip #6: STRETCH. Stretching is an excellent way to release muscular tension associated with accumulated stress. Stretching through the neck, back, and shoulders can be particularly helpful.

Tip #7: TAKE IN PLEASURE. Stress is exacerbated by the mind's natural negativity bias. Fully taking in a pleasurable experience when it arises, bringing full attention to how this feels in the body, and staying with those feelings for at least 20 seconds (5 -6 breaths) can help to restore balance.

Tip #8: MEDITATE. Expanding the capacity to be mindful in the face of stressful circumstances requires practice. Just as dancers practice at the barre, musicians practice scales, and ice skaters practice carving figures in the ice, practicing meditation regularly helps us to be more skillful when the going gets tough. As we cultivate familiarity with mind, heart, and body through meditation practice, we lay the groundwork for new ways of responding to the circumstances that are our lives.

Resources

Websites

[Atlanta Mindfulness](#)

In-Person Sunday Drop-in Meditation Group 6 – 7 pm in Decatur (New meditators welcomed.)

In-Person Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Courses

Mindful Parenting Courses

[East Coast Mindfulness](#)

Online Worldwide Sit 12:15 – 12:45 pm on Thursdays

Online Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Courses. ,



[Happier App](#) Guided meditations, courses, meditation challenges, podcast interviews with renowned teachers and mindfulness researchers.

Books

Mindfulness and Meditation

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Wherever You Go, There You Are, Hatchett Books, 1994.

Dan Harris

10% Happier: How I tamed the voice in my head, reduced stress without losing my edge, and found self-help that actually works—A True Story, Dey Street Books, 2014

Science of Mindfulness

Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson

Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, Body, Penguin Random House, 2018

Richard Hanson

Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence, Harmony Books, 2013.

Stress

Kelly McGonigal

The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good For You And How To Get Good At It, Penguin Random House, 2015.

Elissa Epel

The Stress Prescription: 7 Days to More Joy and Ease, Penguin Random House, 2022

Nervous System Regulation

Deb Dana

Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory, Sounds True, 2021.

Kindness and Compassion

Sharon Salzberg

Real Happiness: A 28-day Program to Realize the Power of Meditation, Shambhala, 1995

Kristen Neff

Self Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind To Yourself, William Morrow Paperbacks, 2015

Please feel free to contact me for additional resources at Laura@atlmindfulness.com